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ABSTRACT

So far bilingual education has had only the most modest success in providing for children of limited English-speaking ability (LESAS) an educational opportunity equal to that of English-speaking children. In fact, to aim only at equality is self-defeating because it is impossible for a LESA child with a five-to-six year handicap ever to catch up with an English-speaking schoolmate. The only solution is to provide the LESA child with a better opportunity in the form of an early start in reading. This paper presents as a reasonable hypothesis a long-range plan for encouraging an LESA child from the age of one and a half to three to learn to read his home language. If he is successful, at age three to five he can learn to read English. In this way, the child overcomes his initial handicap and develops a firm basis for future schooling and for becoming, through ongoing bilingual bicultural education, functional in both his home language and English. (Author/AM)

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BILITERACY, OR THE BILINGUAL CHILD'S RIGHT TO READ

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Introduction

Bilingual schooling, designed to provide equality of educational opportunity for children of limited English-speaking ability (LESA), is making only modest progress toward fulfilling this goal. Modest success may indeed portend ultimate failure and the collapse of yet another educational dream. To forestall the possibility of failure we had better reexamine our objectives.

Do we as a nation really believe in equal opportunity? So far not a single state has affirmed a belief in anything more than transitional bilingual education. This means that in providing something approaching equal access to English we deprive our limited English-speaking ability--our LESA--children of the one educational advantage they possess, namely, another language and another culture. The truth is that if a child is not first educated in and through his mother tongue he will gradually lose the use of it. And while he is losing his first language, he is trying desperately to overcome his handicap in learning his second language, English. Many LESA children never do overcome this handicap and therefore never achieve equality in our competitive society.

We are not the only nation to be faced with this problem.

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Sweden, for example, has received a stream of immigrants from the rest of Europe during recent decades, principally from Finland but also from Greece, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and many other countries. One of the recommendations made to the National Social Welfare Board in connection with its activities to improve preschooling in Sweden reads as follows:

> The right of immigrant children to receive a good training in the language spoken in their home must be given to them without hesitation or delay, cost what it may. This does not mean that they can do without Swedish. They need both, but the home language is the most important if they are to be bilingual.[1]

Such a statement of policy could well serve as a model for us.

While our state and national lawmakers struggle with their consciences, let us educators see what we can do to improve the education of our LESAs. In this paper I wish to propose a rationale and some modest first steps in a long-range plan to make our LESAs not only bilingual and bicultural but, more importantly, biliterate. My goal is not equal but superior education for our bilinguals; for, as we have noted, our aim at equality in their L2, English, results only in inequality in English and gradual loss of L1. Superior education means education for leadership, and our LESAs ought to aim at nothing less. Leadership requires the skillful use of language, both spoken and written, and leadership across cultures and beyond national frontiers requires the skillful use of more than one language and familiarity with more than one culture. Here

our bilinguals have a natural advantage over monolingual Anglos--provided their education enables them to realize this potential advantage. It is our duty as educators to guarantee them this kind of education.

First of all, let us make sure that we do not squander any of their early learning potential by failing to provide opportunities for learning. I shall not deal with the full range of care and training required by the newborn child, but shall instead consider only the field of language learning.

The Beginning of Language Learning

This begins on the first day of life--if not earlier--as we know from the research of William S. Condon and Louis W. Sander who report that "bodily responses to human speech are apparent in babies twelve hours old, and may even exist in the womb. Such instinctive responses, the researchers suspect, represent vital steps in learning to talk."[2] Condon and Sander note that "If the infant, from the beginning, moves in precise, shared rhythm with the organization of the speech structure of his culture, then he participates developmentally through complex, sociobiological entrainment processes in millions of repetitions of linguistic forms long before he later uses them in speaking and communicating. By the time he begins to speak, he may already have laid down within himself the form and structure of the language system of his culture."[3]

The Young Child's Learning Potential

The Condon-Sander research underlines the importance of human speech as a stimulus to language learning. A similar conclusion emerges from the research of Burton L. White of Harvard. White began by studying children from birth to age six but decided later to focus on the period from birth to three. "If most of the qualities that distinguish outstanding six-year-olds can be achieved in large measure by age three, the focus of the project would be narrowed dramatically. We rather abruptly found ourselves concentrating on the zero-to-three age range."[4] According to White, "Children--all children from whatever type of family--seem to be very much alike during the first year of life, but between 10 and 18 months, differences in competencies, especially cognitive abilities, emerged." Indulging in slight hyperbole, White declares that "It's all over by age three." What makes the difference between A's, "exceptionally able children," and C's, "exceptionally unable--but not abnormal or handicapped--children," is the mother. An "A" mother can come from any class but has the "energy and intelligence" to "respond to the children's interests." She "plans a physical world, mainly in the home, that sparks and nurtures the natural curiosity of the one-to-three-year-old."[5]

Evidence pointing to the learning potential of the very young child has multiplied to the point where it can no longer be doubted. A classic study is Benjamin S. Bloom's Stability and Change in Human Characteristics (1964). Summarizing the results

of his extensive research, Bloom concludes that "in terms of intelligence measured at age 17, at least 20% is developed by age 1, 50% by age 4, 80% by age 8, and 92% by age 13."[6]

Early Reading

This brings us to the question: At what age can children learn to read? In a prologue, entitled "Emergent Man--His Environment and Education," to George L. Stevens' and R.C. Orem's book The Case for Early Reading, Buckminster Fuller writes that "The authors have assembled considerable and convincing evidence that the preschool child (Why not call him the 'school-at-home' child?) wants to and will learn to read at home given the opportunity." [7]

Glenn Doman's Work

Glenn Doman, Director of the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia, while working with brain-injured children over a period of twenty years in collaboration with other specialists, discovered that reading could serve as a therapeutic device. This is how he describes his discovery:

> When you are confronted with a brain-injured two-year-old who is no further advanced than a newborn babe--who gives no evidence of being able to see or hear, let alone crawl or raise his head--teaching him to read isn't the first thing you think about; what you think about is how to get through to him, by any method, on any level.
>
> Young Tommy was such a child. His eyes wouldn't follow you, or follow a light, or work together. A loud noise wouldn't make him start. You could pinch him and get no reaction. In fact, the first time we ever got a reaction out of Tommy was when we stuck pins in him: he smiled. It was a great moment for us and for him. We had established contact.

> That was when Tommy was two. By the time he was four he was reading, and thereby hangs a tale....(W)e didn't set out to teach him to read; it just happened along the way, as part of the overall problem of establishing communication.[8]

"But," asks Doman rhetorically, "isn't it easier for a child to understand a spoken word rather than a written one? Not at all," he replies. "The child's brain, which is the only organ that has learning capacity, 'hears' the clear, loud television words through the ear and interprets them as only the brain can. Simultaneously the child's brain 'sees' the big clear television words through his eye and interprets them in exactly the same manner.

"It makes no difference to the brain whether it 'sees' a sight or 'hears' a sound. It can understand both equally well. All that is required is that the sounds be loud enough and clear enough for the ear to hear and the words big enough and clear enough for the eye to see so that the brain can interpret them--the former we have done but the latter we have failed to do."[9]

Söderbergh's Experimentation

In 1965, Ragnhild Söderbergh, a professor of linguistics at the University of Stockholm, undertook to "teach" her two-year-old daughter to read by the Doman method. She reported her success in detail in a book written in English.[10] The experiment was successfully replicated with five more children between the ages of one and a half and three years. This is how she describes her

experiment:

> The reading experiment was carried through with a purely linguistic aim. I wanted to find out how a small child that is shown cards with whole words written on them--one word on each card--and is told what is written on the cards finally succeeds all by himself in learning to read. I wanted to find out about the process behind such an acquisition of reading ability. The experimert showed that the girl 'stored' the words in her memory, and as soon as a new word was presented to her she compared this word with the earlier learnt ones. Through analyses of and comparisons between words the child gradually succeeded in breaking the words up into smaller and smaller units: first she recognized and was able to read morphemes, especially endings, later also graphemes (i.e. letters) and at last she arrived at a full knowledge of the correspondences between graphemes and phonemes (letters and sounds): She had broken the code and was able to read any new word presented to her. In the experiment this breaking of the code was achieved within 14 months (with a daily reading lesson of 5-20 minutes)...But the experiment also yielded useful information of a different kind. It showed that the way a child learns to read seems to be closely tied up with the child's oral linguistic development in syntax and vocabulary. These findings have been confirmed by observations made on five more children, one-and-a-half to three years old, that have been shown reading-cards by their parents.[11]

Other Cases of Early Reading: Durkin, Fowler, Christian, Torrey, Lado

There have been numerous studies of early reading, including case studies. One of the principal students in this field is Dolores Durkin, whose latest book, Teaching Young Children to Read, represents her most advanced position, which I would label middle-of-the-road. She would not deprive children as young as four of an incidental exposure to reading but she does not advocate systematic exposure before four.[12]

William Fowler has worked with young children in an effort to teach them to read, notably his two-year-old daughter and some three-year-old twins. He has had mixed success, failing particularly when he tried too hard and succeeding when he resigned himself to having fun. He has apparently convinced himself that it is perfectly feasible for two-year-olds to learn to read.[13]

Chester Christian, whose wife is Peruvian and who uses Spanish as the usual language of the home, has encouraged his daughter and son to read Spanish from the age of two.[14] His general conclusion, based on his experience, is that learning to read from this early age is no problem provided the children are, or can be, interested.

Jane Torrey studied and reported on the case of a Black boy who had learned to read all by himself before entering kindergarten at age five. He had received no encouragement from his parents or anyone else, but had learned by watching TV, especially advertisements.[15]

And recently Robert Lado of Georgetown University demonstrated to me in his home how his eighteen-month-old son Antonio reads from large cards words in English or Spanish. He had a reading vocabulary at that time of thirty to forty words.

Rationale

We have observed that many current bilingual programs limit their goals to transitional bilingualism and literacy only in English. The result, I fear, is that LESAs, who start with a handicap in English,

rarely catch up with their Anglo schoolmates. And since their home language is not cultivated by the school nor much respected by the surrounding society, it falls into disuse.

The theoretical solution seems obvious: To aim first at literacy in the home language, to be followed by literacy in English.

But timing is important. If one waits until the LESA child goes to school, at age five or six, one risks missing what Montessori calls the "sensitive period" for learning. Furthermore, by the time he reaches school age the LESA child has become aware of the low estate of his language and culture in the community. His confidence and self-esteem are thoroughly undermined and his will to learn destroyed.

Another psychological advantage of a preschool start is suggested by the fact that at the beginning of school there is such pressure on the child to learn to read, exerted by parents and teachers, that if he does not experience immediate success he quickly becomes discouraged and develops a block against reading. If he already knows how to read not only one but two languages when he enters school, reading will hold no terrors for him. It will be instead, as it should be, pure fun.

Tentatively I suggest we accept ages one and a half to three, suggested by Söderbergh, as the most favorable age for beginning to learn to read in L1. If this proves successful and the child has

gained confidence from learning to read his home language, he can then transfer to L2 his ability to read. With luck he can learn to read English by age five and be fully ready to compete with his Anglo companions on a basis of equality at the very least. I am reminded of the case of Chester Christian's five-year-old daughter, who began to read at two and who now at five is the only child in the kindergarten class to read even one language--and she reads two. Once again let me say that it is not enough to aim at equality of opportunity. Equality can be attained only if one provides a superior opportunity, that is, the opportunity to read L1 at home, beginning at age one and a half or two.

Recommendations

Specifically therefore I recommend:

1. That interested parents read Doman's How to Teach Your Baby to Read (or the Spanish edition, Cómo enseñar a leer a su bebé),[16] and follow the suggestions made by Doman, using either English or Spanish, whichever is the home language.

2. That interested infant and early childhood day care or research centers include among their developmental activities that of reading for fun, using techniques developed by Doman and Söderbergh.

3. That interested school systems or bilingual programs initiate limited pilot programs in collaboration with interested parents. Home visitors speaking the home language of the child will first have to be trained, interested parents identified who have children that have just begun to talk (1 1/2 - 3), and adequate financial support found to sustain the program (personnel, materials, evaluation, reports).

4. That a careful record be kept of individual cases and that longitudinal studies be planned and conducted with scientific rigor.

5. That results, positive or negative, be factually reported for the guidance of others.

6. That precautions be taken against premature or exaggerated publicity growing out of possible success. The worst thing that could happen would be to create a new fad.

Conclusions

My proposal of experimentation in early reading in L1 and L2 is not meant to displace any other developmental activities usually pursued by alert and conscientious mothers or by workers in day care or research centers. Instead it is intended to add to the interest and resources of homes and infant centers. It is hypothesized that LESA children who have learned the elements of reading first in L1 and then in L2 before entering the first grade will have gained such confidence in their learning ability that they will not only compete with but will excel their English-speaking schoolmates. It is my contention that LESAs will have to be given this extra advantage in order to achieve genuine equality of opportunity.

How does such preschooling fit into the transitional bilingual programs in the primary grades of our schools? The answer is that of course it does not at all prepare children for such a program. My hope is that those responsible for educational policy in the elementary grades, finding increasing numbers of

children entering the first grade with the ability to read two languages, will not be so shameless as to countenance the suppression of one of these skills. The only alternative is maintenance bilingual education, which is in my opinion the only really defensible form of bilingual schooling.

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